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ABSTRACT

The technique individuals use to narrow the possible responses in "solicits" (demands, requests, or questions requiring a response) in and outside the classroom often helps to avoid miscommunication and can be a useful tool for classroom teachers. A narrowing exercise was completed by 35 classes of native English and English as a second language (ESL) speakers. Transcripts of verbal exchanges among these groups indicate five characteristics of narrowing: space-shape-size, differentiation, label, attribute, and acceptability characteristics. The study shows that teachers can avoid miscommunication by remaining consciously aware of the need to make clear and understandable requests and demands of students. Factors which alter the effectiveness of solicits include content, context, setting, and source of the request. Classroom efforts to improve solicit effectiveness can only improve relationships among students and their teachers. (TR)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Do You Have the Key?

Patrick E. Buckheister
John F. Fanselow

A: Do you have the Key?
B: Yes.

If you stare at these communications for a while, several questions may come to mind, one of which will surely be, "What key?" However, on the occasion that these communications occurred, this question did not enter the minds of the two people involved. A and B, the participants in this interaction, were speeding toward a destination to which A thought B had the key. B, on the other hand, thought A had been asking about the key to the building from which they had departed earlier. Both had ample time to understand that they had been referring to different keys as they made an extra trip back to fetch the key they lacked on their first trip.

We call this type of communication a *miss*, in contrast to a *hit*. If A and B had been thinking of the same key it is probable that a hit would have occurred, eliminating the need for the extra trip. Misses, like hits, occur daily, both in and out of classrooms: "Oh, I thought you meant". . . , "I said blue, not new," "Oh, I thought you said 22 not 32," "You should've turned back there."

Since the key incident occurred, we have been looking at *solicits*—demands, requests, or questions requiring a response—in order to see ways we *narrow* the choice of possible response in classrooms and outside of classrooms. *Narrowing* in solicits refers to the inclusion of components which set criteria or establish categories for the subsequent response, thereby narrowing response possibilities. In this article we will describe some ways people narrow response choices in solicits made outside the classroom and the frequency of their occurrence in 35 classes which we observed: 8 adult ESL, 11 high school science, 6 high school social studies, and 10 elementary school social studies. Transcripts from these four class types were available from four different sources at the time of this study, having been previously prepared for other studies. The ESL transcripts were made from video tapes taken in eight

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different classes. All other transcripts were made from audio tapes, again each coming from a different class. The use of existing transcripts allowed more time to be devoted to coding and describing a wider variety of class types and a larger number of classes than would have been otherwise possible.

The purpose of our description is to make teachers aware of the phenomenon of narrowing and to consider the use of narrowing in ESL teaching. A further goal is to explore how the proportion of hits and misses changes with the employment of different narrowing components. Our aim is not to say what proportion of narrowing components should be used. Following work by Gage (1972) and Rosenshine (1971), we have come to believe that teacher *shoulds* are difficult to discover.

Before we discuss narrowing components, it should be pointed out that "Do you have the key?" is different from typical classroom solicits in two ways. First, as it is a "yes/no" question it is rare in many classrooms, as Bellack, Hyman, Smith, and Kliebard (1966), among others, have shown. In the 35 classes we studied, "yes/no" questions occurred only 192 times out of the 3502 solicits which were recorded. "Do you have the key?" is also different from most classroom questions because the person asking it did not know the answer beforehand. This is also a rare situation, occurring only 79 times for the 3502 solicits in our study. This finding does show accord with Hoetker and Ahlbrand's (1969) review of classroom studies which shows that in general teachers solicit responses containing known facts more than any other type of response. By not containing a component that narrows the choice of possible responses, however, "Do you have the key?" is similar to most of the solicits examined in this study and in a previous study by Fanselow (1977).

The *narrowing characteristics* we have looked for may be looked upon as clues or cues within the solicit which do one of five things: (1) pertain to the space, shape, or size of the expected response, (2) compare or contrast the expected response to something, (3) assign a label to the expected response, (4) mention attributes of the expected response, or (5) set acceptability standards for the expected response. They are called, respectively, *space-shape-size characteristics, differentiation characteristics, label characteristics, attribute characteristics,* and *acceptability characteristics.* Since these narrowing characteristics occurred in less than 15 percent of the 3502 solicits from the 35 classes studied, we went outside the classroom to look for an environment in which they all occurred frequently. The device we discovered, which serves as a framework for the following discussion, was the crossword puzzle. Like classrooms, they contain many solicits to which the writers know the answers, yet crossword puzzles include at least one and often several narrowing characteristics for each task set (e.g., name of *ancient Egyptian* ruler, *four letters*). The comparison of a crossword puzzle to a classroom is furthered by the fact that in both cases parties involved in setting the tasks (the teacher and the puzzle writer) and parties involved in responding (students and puzzle fans) have an intense interest in hits, or desirable responses, and misses.

Space-shape-size Characteristics

The most eye-catching narrowing characteristic in crossword puzzles, even from across the room, is the clue given by the boxes, which could be classed as a *space-shape-size characteristic.* Three boxes across definitely tell the person responding that the answer cannot be *r-e-f-r-i-g-e-r-a-t-o-r.* Examples of this type of narrowing characteristic in classroom solicits we studied are:

Student: White plastic . . . brush tooth
Teacher: (*makes a switching motion by crossing one arm over the other*)
Student: White plastic toothbrush
Student: Massachusetts, New Jersey, Delaware
Teacher: No, no, no. Delaware is in yellow. *Above* New Jersey, a *little* letter *C*, there's a *little piece* of land—what is it?
Student: Connecticut.

Some classroom participants may use other mediums of communication to indicate a space-shape-size characteristic, such as using a pointer, counting on the fingers, or writing with colored chalk. Yet crossword puzzles, which are for many people a language learning experience, use this type of clue in every solicit, whereas we have only seen 271 uses of these space-shape-size characteristics in the 3502 solicits recorded, and 94 of these occurred in one particular classroom. Unlike the crossword puzzle writers, we may be looking at language as the only destination while at the same time seeing it as the only route.

Differentiation Characteristics

A second type of narrowing characteristic that a crossword puzzle demonstrates is found in items such as this:

Across
1. Rhymes with "mine"

This and other indications of similarity and differences we call *differentiation characteristics*. In daily communications we have observed recently, differentiation characteristics appeared in the following solicits:

Do you have the *same type* of cat food you sold me last week?
I'm late. Find me a pair of socks *that match*.
This *isn't like* the show we have in Muncie, is it?

Smith (1975) attributes much of early concept development in children to the process of grouping together by similarity and discriminating on the basis of differences. Teachers comparing solicits communications with those that occurred last week, or comparing communications of one person to those of another would be using differentiation characteristics. However, our 35 classrooms showed that differentiation characteristics had a very low frequency of occurrence among the solicits that took place there—31 times out of 3502.

Label Characteristics

A third type of narrowing characteristic which crossword puzzles show us is that of *labels*. *Common noun, mechanical conveyance, citrus fruit*, all are examples of labels that are found in the task of doing a crossword puzzle. Children also label from an early age, talking of "mommysock" (Bloom and Lahey, 1978) at first and working on to "these are mine and don't touch them" later. In the 35 classrooms we looked at, an abundance of labels were used—the *teacher's* desk, *vowels* and *consonants, endocrine* glands, and so on. However, like other narrowing characteristics, label characteristics were only rarely used in solicits. They occurred mainly in

the extended discourse of the teacher, in student responses, and in teacher comments about those responses. Label characteristics occurred in the 3502 solicits only 39 times.

Attribute Characteristics

Indicating attributes of the thing talked about is the fourth type of narrowing characteristic inherent in a crossword puzzle. *Enjoyable summer* activity, *divisible by two*, *strong* cloth, and so on are examples of *attribute characteristics*, which allow us to classify and eliminate possibilities, thereby narrowing the choice of response. We use this category in this study as a catchall for narrowing characteristics which do not clearly fit into any other category. Of the 112 attribute characteristics occurring in the 3502 solicits studied, the following are some examples:

Teacher: Does anyone know what substance you use in the kitchen *that's made mostly of acetic acid*?
Student: Vinegar.
Teacher: But we *ordinarily* say . . .
Student: Boots.
Teacher: Yes, Edward, it will be hotter close to the equator. And how about the southern part, *with fewer palm trees and coconuts*?
Student: Cool.

As with differentiation and label characteristics, attribute characteristics occurring in a teacher's classroom solicits will usually increase the linguistic length of the solicits. (Space-shape-size characteristics are a notable exception here, often occurring in non-linguistic mediums.) Yet, the addition of an attribute characteristic, such as *divisible by two* to a solicit involving a number as a response, has the potential of cutting the possible responses in half or even further. In this particular case all odd numbers are ruled out.

Acceptability Characteristics

The fifth way that a narrowing characteristic is demonstrated when responding to a crossword puzzle usually involves feedback, such as having someone peer over the shoulder of the person doing the puzzle. The clues given under these circumstances can be called *acceptability characteristics* and usually come in the form of a raised eyebrow accompanied by "*look at 15 Down again—it looks wrong to me*" or "*are you sure about 18 Across?*" There is a rather essential difference between acceptability characteristics and the other four types of narrowing characteristics just described. Insofar as statements on acceptability are inherently evaluative, acceptability characteristics might be more likely to occur in corrective solicits made after an initial response has occurred to an initial solicit. Although only 24 out of the 3502 solicits studied contained an acceptability characteristic, it was the case that six of these were in corrective solicits such as:

Teacher: Read the sentence that tells it.
Student: (reads a sentence from the book)
Teacher: Is that the *right* sentence?

Teacher: (holding a raincoat)
Uh, color.
Student: Grays.
Teacher: (holds out palms of hands)
No *s*, no *s*.
Student: Gray.

As with *label characteristics*, acceptability characteristics did occur in the classrooms we studied even though they did not occur frequently in solicits. Typically we saw them in teacher reactions to student responses, and sometimes in student-to-student reactions regarding personal comments and events. Their rarity in corrective solicits and in initial solicits may reflect a holdover from behaviorism, that students should never be given a wrong example even if it is distinguished as such. Acceptability may not be an issue in classrooms, during soliciting, due to some desire for acceptable responses only.

What the comparison of the crossword puzzle solicits and the classroom solicits we studied shows is that narrowing characteristics are used consciously in the fashioning of the former and only incidentally in the fashioning of the latter. Table 1 shows the total number and percentage of the narrowing characteristics in the 35 classes we observed.

Table 1

	Number of Classes	Type of Class	Number of solicits*	Number of solicits with narrowing characteristic**	Percentage of solicits with narrowing characteristics
	8	ESL adult	2087	316	15%
	11	Science high school	448	81	18%
	6	Social studies high school	399	50	13%
	10	Social studies elementary	568	30	5%
Totals	35		3502	477	13%

*demands, requests, or questions that required a response such as "What's this?," Repeat after me.
**demands, requests, or questions that required a response that contained an optional component that served as a clue or as a message to limit the range of possible responses, such as "What's this?—a three letter word" or "Repeat—but slowly."

What can teachers do with information about narrowing characteristics in solicits? First, we can increase the number of narrowing characteristics we use, especially in initial solicits. By doing this, we can begin to see the extent to which solicits that set criteria or establish categories affect hits and misses. We can begin to see how these types of solicits aid in adjusting the difficulty of solicits. Donaldson (1978) has shown how the alteration of just one word in solicits in tests can radically alter the number of hits and misses. There is no reason to believe that manipulating narrowing characteristics in classroom solicits would not have the same effect.

There are, of course, a variety of other variables which need to be considered at the same time narrowing characteristics are manipulated. "Close the door before I count to three" and "Write your answer in five words" both contain a space-shape-size characteristic, "before I count to three" and "in five words," respectively. Yet, though the type of narrowing characteristic used is the same, the former pertains to class management in a social studies class and the latter pertains to the study of language in an ESL class. The content of a narrowing characteristic may then be related or unrelated to the subject matter of a class. Likewise, it may be related or unrelated to class management or to the lives of the participants. It may be the case that in a particular class the total of narrowing characteristics is larger because the teacher injects a narrowing characteristic into each solicit regarding class management. At the same time as the content of the narrowing characteristic is considered, consideration of the class type becomes necessary. If "Close the door before I count to three" occurs in an ESL class, it may well be the case that the content of "before I count to three" is not being used as a management device, but for the study of language, for example, as a test of comprehension for new lexis.

Previous announcements no doubt also narrow choices. Guessing the names of flowers or birds is likely to result in more hits if we are told before the first solicit that all responses need to name items that are yellow. Without this announcement, daffodil or canary would be preceded by more misses than would be the case following this announcement, even though the solicits themselves in both cases would not contain narrowing characteristics. In other words, narrowing characteristics may be communicated in announcements that precede solicits rather than in solicits themselves. This both provides another teaching alternative and alerts us to the fact that other variables can affect the proportion of hits and misses.

Context and setting also affect hits and misses. When someone approaches us on the street and asks "Where's the post office?," we are surrounded with buildings and landmarks that classroom learners do not have. We also know that most of the time a question on the street will be in regard to directions or some other procedural matter (e.g., the time, a match)—and not something personal, such as what we had for dinner the night before. In the classroom, however, the context may not change for long periods of time and the roles may remain the same day after day. This lack of variability itself does little or nothing to help narrow choices for responses, but if contexts do vary, then they will affect the ratio of hits and misses just as narrowing characteristics will. As a result, contexts must be explored too.

Furthermore, the source of the solicit with a narrowing characteristic needs to be noted. Who or what is doing the soliciting? Outside of classrooms, the person in the role of student often adds a narrowing characteristic. Consider this conversation in a drugstore:

Customer: Do you have any earplugs?
Clerk: For *sleeping* or *swimming*?
Customer: For noise.
Clerk: You want sleeping.

Here, the clerk is in the role of a student, responding to the solicit from the customer,

who at the first moment is in charge. The clerk as student adds a narrowing characteristic—two, in fact. Having students begin to ask questions after solicits they do not understand with narrowing characteristics in them may increase the total number of these components. But comparing just total numbers and not noting who does the soliciting in various classes will obscure what may be as important a variable as the narrowing characteristic itself: the source of it. These variables have been explored in more detail (see Sanselow 1984).

It is often the case that teachers want to know clearly what impact on or implications for daily classroom practice a particular piece of research has. Given the limitations of this study, however, any prescriptive statement would be out of the question and we currently regard much discussion of implications here as premature. We have undertaken the study of narrowing components and their relationship to hits and misses in a spirit of exploration. Our goal throughout this study has been to develop a progressively clearer description of a particular component of solicits inside and outside classrooms. Given both the range of types of narrowing characteristics, as well as the variety of other variables that probably affect hits and misses, it seems unlikely that we will ever have the key to hits and misses. A certain amount of miscommunication, like a certain amount of disease, seems inevitable. But the discomfort of some diseases can be eased, and the prevention of others can be discovered, partly as a result of systematic description of the features of healthy and diseased cells. In the same way, the distress of some misses can be eased, and the prevention of others can be sought, through the type of non-judgemental description of the components of solicits we have reported here more than prescriptions to do one thing or another.

Even if the number of misses is not decreased a great deal, at least as a result of this type of exploration it is more likely that we will conclude that most misses are caused by describable rules that we follow in different settings. And even though following the rules of crossword puzzle solicits may alter the proportion of hits and misses less than we might want, ultimately the process of searching for the key may be more important than finding it because the search shows how normal misses, as well as hits, really are.

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